

Stress, isolation and free time: People are drinking more amid pandemic, study says

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As the coronavirus pandemic stretches into the year, more adults are drinking to cope, and alcohol sales have surged across the country, a new study says.

Parents, women, [unemployed people](#), Black people and adults with mental health concerns increased their alcohol consumption between

February and April, according to a study released from RTI International, a nonprofit research institute in Research Triangle Park.

"After the terrorist attacks on September 11 and also Hurricane Katrina, there was sustained increases in alcohol assumption," said Carolina Barbosa, a health economist at RTI. "The weeks of isolation imposed by stay-at-home policies and the scale of the current pandemic are unmatched by these recent disasters."

RTI surveyed nearly 1,000 people online in the United States last month to see how their alcohol consumption changed between February and April.

States across the country implemented different shelter-in-place measures beginning in March to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Gov. Roy Cooper ordered North Carolinians to stay at home beginning March 25.

The respondents on average upped their daily alcohol intake from 0.74 drinks in February to 0.94 in April, RTI said.

About 35% reported excessive drinking in April, compared to 29% in February, and 27% reported binge drinking. The survey did not differentiate between different types of alcohol.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism recommends women do not consume more than three drinks per day and seven drinks per week and men no more than four drinks per day and 14 drinks per week. RTI defined excessive drinking as anyone who drank more than this total. Binge drinking, RTI said, is when a man consumes more than four drinks in two hours and a woman consumes over three in the same time frame.

Around 10% of respondents don't drink at all, the study said.

"We also saw large increases in consumption among those who were not drinking in excess of recommended guidelines in February," Barbosa said. "And this is especially concerning, because this is not people who always drank a lot suddenly drinking more, this is people who drank within the guidelines drinking a lot more."

Nationwide alcohol sales climbed 26% between March and June this year compared to last year, according to the Nielsen Corp.

Liquor sales in North Carolina surged 21% last month compared to June of last year, the N.C. ABC Commission reported. Sales also jumped 21% in March.

Alcohol consumption weakens immune systems and makes people more susceptible to COVID-19, RTI said.

A closer look at the numbers

The study breaks down the respondents' answers by race. White people reported consuming about one drink per day, which is more than any other racial group, but Black people reported the most excessive drinking, the study said. RTI said 66% of survey respondents were white, 19% were Hispanic, 9% were Black and 7% were "other."

"As we saw with females, non-white respondents increased more in relative terms because those groups drank less than white respondents did in February," said William Dowd, a research economist at RTI.

Women reported more binge and [excessive drinking](#) than men between February and April. Unemployed people drank twice as much as people with jobs in the last few months. About 30% of respondents said they

drank seven more days per month than they did before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"About a quarter of the sample reported having kids in the household, and three quarters did not. Respondents with kids reported an increase in drinks per day that was more than four times as large on average than the subgroup without kids," Dowd said.

People who live in the West drank 0.35 more drinks in April than February, the highest increase of any region. People who live in the South reported consuming 0.16 more drinks than usual during this period.

Why are people drinking more?

RTI believes people drank more in April than February because people had more leisure time and were stressed about the coronavirus pandemic. Lax alcohol policies made it easier for these people to buy alcohol, Barbosa said.

"After the enactment of stay-at-home orders in many states and the relaxation of several state alcohol regulations, alcohol consumption, including drinking above the recommended guidelines and binge [drinking](#), increased," Barbosa said.

State officials in Maryland, New Jersey and New York deemed liquor stores essential, and restaurants in New York, Vermont, Nebraska, Colorado and California can sell drinks for takeout and delivery.

North Carolina, however, has not relaxed alcohol restrictions, said Jeff Strickland, a spokesperson for the N.C. ABC Commission. But the state is allowing stores to sell alcohol for curbside pickup as these businesses struggle because of the pandemic.

"North Carolina ... in fact tightened (alcohol regulations)," Strickland said. "For example, no onsite consumption of alcohol was allowed at any ABC-permitted business during Phase 1, and some businesses are still unable to have onsite consumption during Phase 2."

North Carolina is still in Phase 2 of the state's coronavirus reopening plan. Gov. Roy Cooper announced Tuesday that he would extend the time frame for this phase another three weeks for the second time.

Bars are still shut down under Phase 2, but restaurants can open at half-capacity.

Beer and wine delivery is legal in North Carolina, according to the National Alcohol Beverage Control Association.

Orange County last week limited dining-room sales and banned restaurants from selling beverages, including alcohol, after 10 p.m., the N&O reported. Officials from Durham and Wake counties do not have plans to implement similar restrictions.

Coronavirus cases continue to climb in North Carolina. Over 87,000 people have tested positive for COVID-19 in North Carolina and 1,510 people have died, the state reported Monday.

Long-term effects of alcohol consumption

Alcohol consumption is the third-leading preventable cause of death in the United States behind tobacco and poor diets, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Almost 6% of deaths worldwide in 2012 were connected to [alcohol](#) consumption, the World Health Organization said.

"(A) big question is whether relaxed rules on [alcohol sales](#) can become

permanent after the pandemic," Barbosa said. "If these measures are not reversed post-pandemic, they have the potential to increase population-level [alcohol consumption](#) and corresponding harms for the long term."

Kurtis Taylor, the executive director of the Alcohol/Drug Council of North Carolina, said the coronavirus pandemic is causing stress and anxiety that makes some people want to drink more.

"I think that the shelter-in-place aspect has had devastating and long-term effects—many that we haven't seen the full results from yet," Taylor said in a statement to the N&O. "People are developing issues that will not be easily shaken."

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